

Research on apologies has focused on two main types: personal apologies for social infractions by individuals and institutional or governmental apologies for particular policies or incidents. The former have been studied in individual languages (e.g. Holmes 1990), in cross-linguistic perspective (e.g. Olshtain 1989) and in the discourse of second/foreign language learners (e.g. Bergman and Kasper 1993), and the latter in English and a few other languages (e.g. Zhang 2003). Recently, a new apology context has developed which has not received attention in the linguistic literature: the Internet posting or hard copy publication of apologies by large numbers of individuals for a single event or policy brought about by a nation of voters or government. An example is sorryeverybody.com, a website where thousands of Americans apologized for the 2004 presidential election, won by George W. Bush. This is an unprecedented object of study, comprising a database of several thousand naturally occurring apologies, all on the same topic. Moreover, most posters included a personal photo, thus providing information on gender and relative age range. Finally, many posters included information about where they live as well.

Using the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project framework (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989), we identified the components of the apologies: core speech act (e.g. "I'm sorry") and various types of supporting material, including statements of the problem (e.g. "We let America down") and promises of repair (e.g. "We'll fix this.") We also considered the variables of age, gender, and geographical affiliation. Contrary to previous research on personal apologies (e.g. Holmes 1989), age was a stronger distinguishing factor than gender, although gender showed some small but significant differences within particular age groups. Really striking, however, is the degree to which notions of identity play a role in the expression of the apologies. On the one hand, American identity is a critical factor in self-selection for writing the apology in the first place: people do not normally apologize for something for which they bear no responsibility. On the other hand, a large majority of the apologizers explicitly attempt to mitigate this implicit understanding of national group membership in several ways. Most notably, nearly half the apologizers aligned themselves with a particular geographical location (e.g. "I apologize on behalf of Ohio"). Others aligned themselves with an age group, religion, political philosophy, sexual orientation, or minority group, or referred to a desire to leave the country. We argue that complex, conflicted feelings about identity on several levels led to apologies in which responsibility is simultaneously both accepted and rejected. The result is a set of discourses where literal apology to others is almost paradoxically combined with attempts at image repair and expressions of sadness for the unfortunate effects of the event on the posters themselves, not as rehabilitation of individual reputation, but as dissociation from even guiltier parties.